

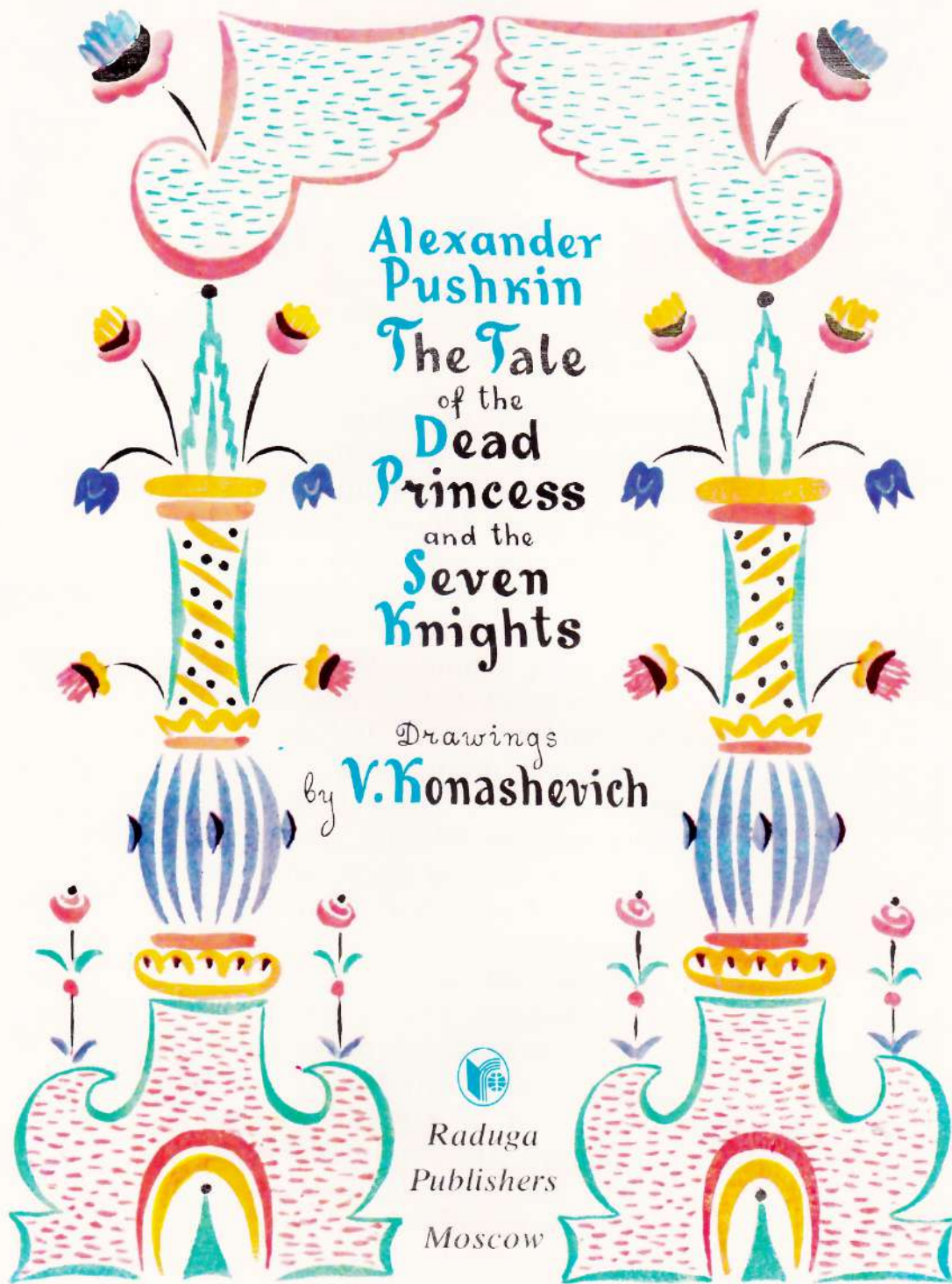
A. Pushkin

*THE TALE*  
OF THE DEAD PRINCESS  
AND THE SEVEN KNIGHTS











With his suite the Tsar departed.  
The Tsaritsa tender-hearted  
At the window sat alone,  
Wishing he would hurry home.  
All day every day she waited,  
Gazing till her dedicated  
Eyes grew weak from overstrain,  
Gazing at the empty plain.  
Not a sign of her beloved!  
Nothing but the snowflakes hurried  
Heaping drifts upon the lea.  
Earth was white as white could be.  
Nine long months she sat and waited,  
Kept her vigil unabated.  
Then from God on Christmas Eve  
She a daughter did receive.  
Next day early in the morning,  
Love and loyalty rewarding,  
Home again from travel far  
Came at last the father-Tsar.  
One fond glance at him she darted,  
Gasped for joy with thin lips parted  
Then fell back upon her bed  
And by prayer-time was dead.





Long the Tsar sat lonely, brooding.  
But he, too, was only human.  
Tears for one sad year he shed...  
And another woman wed.  
She (if one be strictly truthful)  
Was a born Tsaritsa—youthful,  
Slim, tall, fair to look upon,  
Clever, witty—and so on.  
But she was in equal measure  
Stubborn, haughty, wilful, jealous.  
In her dowry rich and vast  
Was a little looking-glass.  
It had this unique distinction:  
It could speak with perfect diction.  
Only with this glass would she  
In a pleasant humour be.  
Many times a day she'd greet it  
And coquettishly entreat it:  
“Tell me, pretty looking-glass,  
Nothing but the truth, I ask:  
Who in all the world is fairest  
And has beauty of the rarest?”  
And the looking-glass replied:  
“You, it cannot be denied.  
You in all the world are fairest  
And your beauty is the rarest.”  
The Tsaritsa laughed with glee,  
Shrugged her shoulders merrily,  
Puffed her cheeks and bat her eyelids,  
Flicked her fingers coyly, slyly,  
Pranced around with hand on hips,  
Arrogance upon her lips.





All this time the Tsar's own daughter  
Quietly, as Nature taught her,  
Grew and grew, and came quite soon  
Like a flower into bloom:  
Raven-browed, of fair complexion,  
Breathing kindness and affection.  
And the choice of fiancé  
Lighted on Prince Yelisei.  
Suit was made. The Tsar consented  
And her dowry was indented:  
Seven towns with wealthy store,  
Mansion-houses—sevenscore.

On the night before the wedding  
For a bridal party dressing  
The Tsaritsa, time to pass,  
Chatted with her looking-glass:  
“Who in all the world is fairest  
And has beauty of the rarest?”  
Then what did the glass reply?  
“You are fair, I can't deny.  
But the Princess is the fairest  
And her beauty is the rarest.”  
Up the proud Tsaritsa jumped.  
On the table how she thumped,  
Angrily the mirror slapping,  
Slipper heel in fury tapping!  
“O you loathsome looking-glass,  
Telling lies as bold as brass!  
By what right is she my rival?  
Such young folly I shall bridle.  
So she's grown up—me to spite!  
Little wonder she's so white:  
With her bulging mother gazing  
At that snow—what's so amazing!

Now look here, explain to me  
How can she the fairer be?  
Scour this realm of ours and seek well,  
Nowhere shall you find my equal.  
Is not that the truth?" she cried.  
Still the looking-glass replied:  
"But the Princess is the fairest  
And her beauty is the rarest."  
The Tsaritsa burst with spite,  
Hurled the mirror out of sight  
Underneath the nearest cupboard  
And when breath she had recovered  
Summoned Smudge, her chamber maid,  
And to her instructions gave:  
"Take the Princess to the forest,  
Bind her hand and foot and forehead  
To a tree! When wolves arrive  
Let them eat the girl alive!"









Woman's wrath would daunt the devil!  
Protest was no use whatever.  
Soon the Princess left with Smudge  
For the woods. So far they trudged  
That the Princess guessed the reason.  
Scared to death by such foul treason,  
Loud she pleaded: "Spare my life!  
Innocent of guilt am I!  
Do not kill me, I beseech you!  
And when I become Tsaritsa  
I shall give you rich reward."  
Smudge, who really loved her ward,  
Being loth to kill or bind her,  
Let her go, remarking kindly:  
"God be with you! Do not moan!"  
And, this said, went back alone.  
"Well?" demanded the Tsaritsa,  
"Where's that pretty little creature?"  
"In the forest on her own,"  
Smudge replied. "And there she'll stay.  
To a tree I firmly lashed her.  
When a hungry beast attacks her  
She'll have little time to cry  
And the quicker she shall die!"

Rumour spread and caused a panic:  
"What, the Tsar's own daughter vanished!"  
Mournful was the Tsar that day.  
But the young Prince Yelisei  
Offered God a fervent prayer  
And departed then and there  
To seek out and homeward guide  
His sweet-tempered, youthful bride.







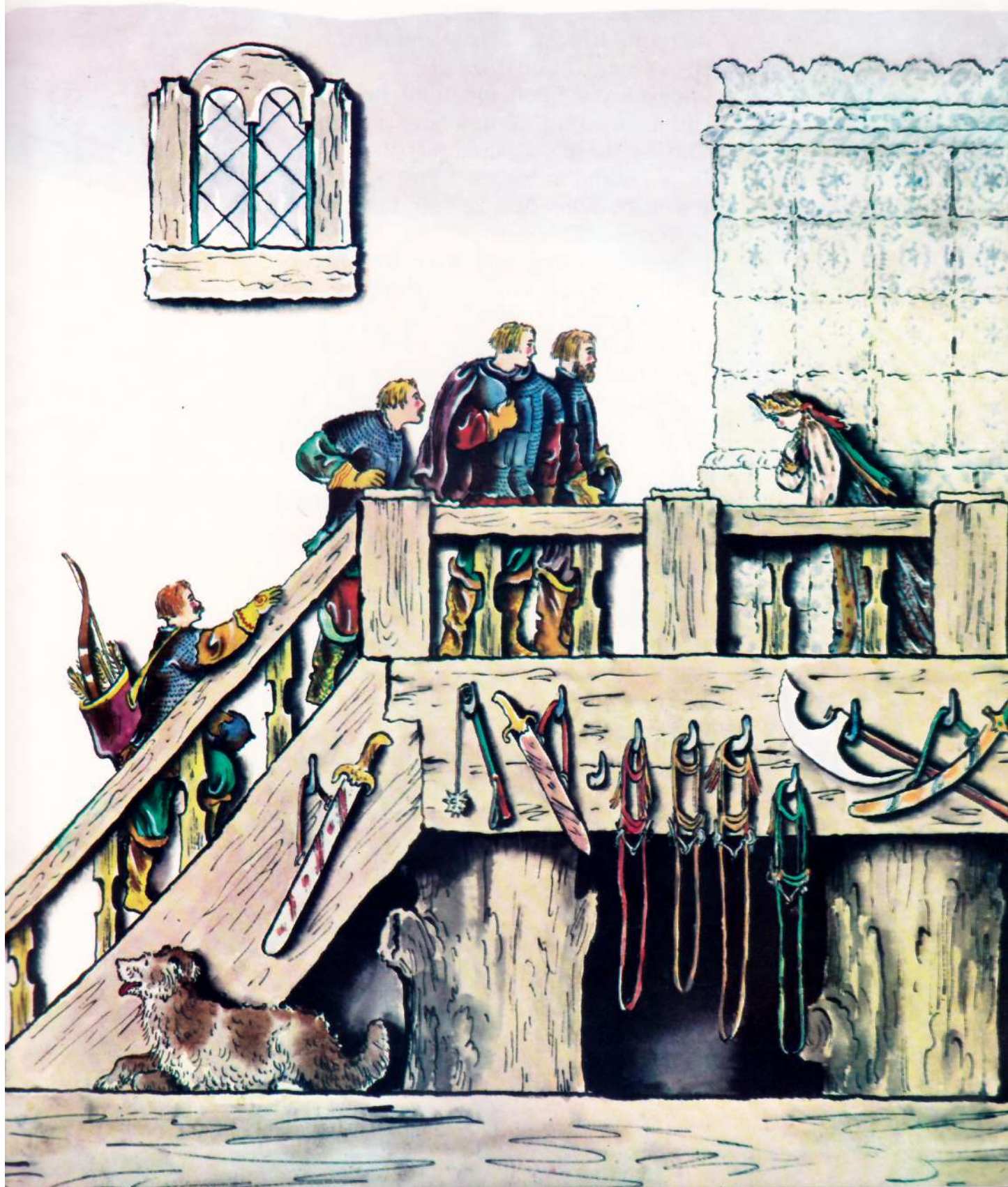
Meanwhile his young bride kept walking  
Through the forest until morning,  
Vague as to her whereabouts.  
Suddenly she spied a house.  
Out a dog ran growling, yapping,  
Then sat down, his tail tap-tapping.  
At the gate there was no guard.  
All was quiet in the yard.  
Close at heel the good dog bounded  
As the Princess slowly mounted  
Stairs to gain the living floor,  
Turned the ring upon the door.  
Silently the door swung open  
And before her eyes unfolded  
A bright chamber: all around  
Benches strewn with rugs she found,  
Board of oak beneath the ikon  
And a stove with tiles to lie on.  
To the Princess it was clear  
Kindly folk were dwelling here  
Who would not deny her shelter.  
No one was at home, however.  
So she set to, cleaned the pans,  
Made the whole house spick and span,  
Lit a candle in the corner,  
Fed the fire to be warmer,  
Climbed onto the platform bed  
There to lay her sleepy head.  
Dinner time. The yard resounded,  
Horses stamped and men dismounted.  
Thick-moustached and ruddy-skinned,  
Seven lusty Knights walked in.













Said the Eldest: "How amazing!  
All so neat! The fire blazing!  
Somebody's been cleaning here  
And is waiting somewhere near.  
Who is there? Come out of hiding!  
Be a friend in peace abiding!  
If you're someone old and hoar,  
Be our uncle evermore!  
If you're young and love a scuffle,  
We'll embrace you as a brother.  
If a venerable dame,  
Then shall 'mother' be your name.  
If a maiden fair, we'll call you  
Our dear sister and adore you."

So the Princess rose, came down  
To the Seven Knights and bowed,  
Her good wishes emphasising,  
Blushing and apologising  
That to their delightful home  
Uninvited she had come.  
Straight they saw her speech bore witness  
To the presence of a Princess.  
So they cleared a corner seat,  
Offered her a pie with meat,  
Filled a glass with wine and served it  
On a tray, as she deserved it.  
But the glass of heady wine  
She politely did decline  
And the pie she broke with caution,  
Savouring a tiny portion.  
Pleading she was very tired,  
Soon she gracefully retired  
And the Seven Knights conveyed her  
To the best and brightest chamber

And, away as they did creep,  
She was falling fast asleep.

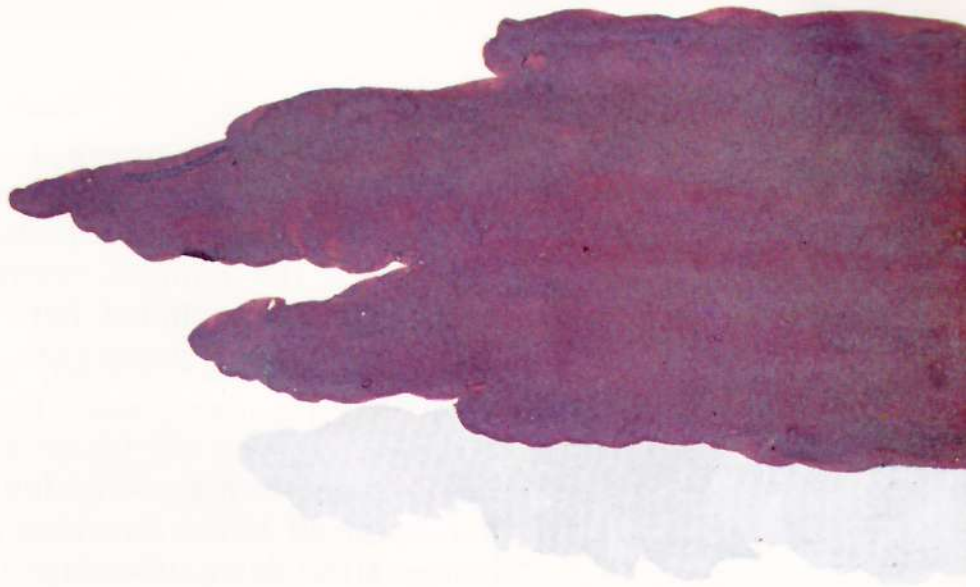


Days flew by—the Princess living  
All the time without misgiving  
In the forest, never bored  
With the Seven Knights abroad.  
Darkness would the earth still cover  
When at dawn the seven brothers  
Would ride out to try their luck  
With a long-bow, shooting duck,  
Or to ply their sword in battle  
And a Saracen unsaddle,  
Headlong at a Tartar go,  
Chop his head off at a blow,  
Or give chase to a Circassian,  
From the forest send him dashing.











She, as lady of the house,  
Rose much later, moved about  
Dusting, polishing and cooking,  
Never once the Knights rebuking.  
They, too, never chided her.  
Days flew by like gossamer.

And in time they grew to love her.  
Thereupon all seven brothers  
Shortly after dawn one day  
To her chamber made their way  
And the Eldest Knight addressed her:  
“As you know, you are our sister.  
But all seven of us here  
Are in love with you, my dear,  
And we all desire your favours.  
But that must not be, God save us!  
Find some way to give us peace!  
Be a wife to one at least,  
To the rest remain a sister!  
But you shake your head. Is this to  
Say our offer you refuse?  
Nothing from our stock you'll choose?”

“O my brave and bonny brothers,  
Virtuous beyond all others!”  
In reply the Princess said,  
“God in heaven strike me dead  
If my answer be not honest:  
I've no choice—my hand is promised!  
You're all equal in my eyes,  
All so valiant and wise,  
And I love you all, dear brothers!

But my heart is to another  
Pledged for evermore. One day  
I shall wed Prince Yelisei!"

Hushed, the brothers kept their station,  
Scratched their foreheads in frustration.  
"As you wish! So now we know,"  
Said the Eldest with a bow.  
"Pray forgive us—and I promise  
You'll hear nothing further from us!"  
"I'm not angry," she replied.  
"By my pledge I must abide."  
Bowing low, the seven suitors  
Left her room with passions muted.  
So in harmony again  
Did they live and friendship reign.

The Tsaritsa was still livid  
Every time she saw in vivid  
Memory the Princess fair.  
Long the mirror, lying there,  
Was the object of her hatred;  
But at last her wrath abated.  
So one day it came to pass  
That she took the looking-glass  
Up again and sat before it,  
Smiled and, as before, implored it:  
"Greetings, pretty looking-glass!  
Tell me all the truth, I ask:  
Who in all the world is fairest  
And has beauty of the rarest?"  
Said the mirror in reply:  
"You are fair, I can't deny.





But where Seven Knights go riding  
In a green oak-grove residing  
Humbly lives a person who  
Is more beautiful than you."  
The Tsaritsa's wrath descended  
On her maid: "What folly tempted  
You to lie? You disobeyed!"  
Smudge a full confession made...  
Uttering a threat of torture,  
The Tsaritsa grimly swore to  
Send the Princess to her death  
Or not draw another breath.



One day by her window waiting  
For her brothers homeward hasting  
Sat the young Princess and span.  
Suddenly the dog began  
Barking. Through the courtyard scurried  
A poor beggar-woman, worried  
By the dog she kept at bay  
With her stick. "Don't go away!  
Stay there, stay!" the Princess shouted,  
From the window leaning outward.  
"Let me call the dog to heel  
And I'll offer you a meal."



And the beggar-woman answered:  
"Pretty child, you take my fancy!  
For that dog of yours, you see,  
Could well be the death of me.  
See him snarling, bristling yonder!  
Come here, child!" The Princess wanted  
To go out, and took a loaf.  
But the dog its body wove  
Round her feet, refused to let her  
Step towards the woman-beggar.  
When the woman, too, drew near,  
Wilder than an angry bear  
It attacked her. How perplexing!  
"Had a bad night's sleep, I reckon!"  
Said the Princess. "Catch it! There!"  
And the bread flew through the air.  
The poor beggar-woman caught it.  
"I most humbly thank you, daughter,  
God be merciful!" said she.  
"In return take this from me!"  
The bright apple she was holding,  
Newly picked, fresh, ripe and golden,  
Straight towards the Princess flew...  
How the dog leapt in pursuit!  
But the Princess neatly trapped it  
In her palms. "Enjoy the apple  
At you leisure, little pet!  
Thank you for the loaf of bread..."  
Said the beggar-woman, brandished  
In the air her stick and vanished...  
Up the stairs the Princess ran  
With the dog, which then began  
Pitifully staring, whining  
Just as if its heart were pining  
For the gift of speech to say:  
"Throw that apple far away!"

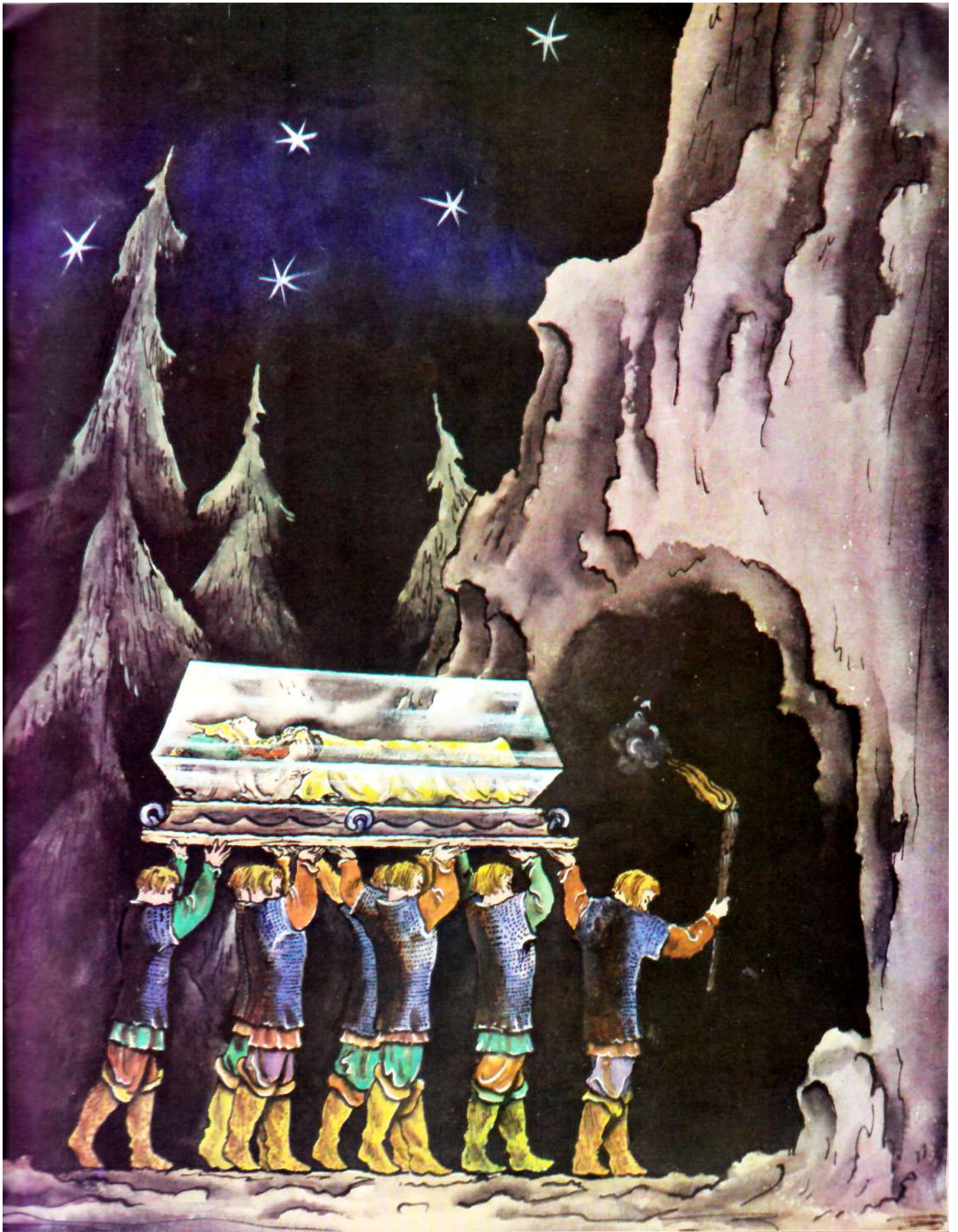
Hastily his neck she patted:  
"Hey, Sokolko, what's the matter?  
Lie down!" Entering once more  
Her own room, she shut the door,  
Sat there with her spindle humming,  
Waiting for her brothers' coming.  
But she could not take her gaze  
From the apple where it lay  
Full of fragrance, rosy, glowing,  
Fresh and juicy, ripe and golden,  
Sweet as honey to the lips!  
She could even see the pips...  
First the Princess thought of waiting  
Until dinner. But temptation  
Proved too strong. She grasped the bright  
Apple, took a stealthy bite  
And with fair cheek sweetly hollowed  
A delicious morsel swallowed.  
All at once her breathing stopped,  
Listlessly her white arms dropped.  
From her lap the rosy apple  
Tumbled to the floor. The hapless  
Maiden closed her swooning eyes,  
Reeled and fell without a cry,  
On the bench her forehead striking,  
Then lay still beneath the ikon...





Now the brothers, as it chanced,  
Were returning in a band  
From another warlike foray.  
Out to meet them in the forest  
Went the dog and, running hard,  
Led them straight into the yard.  
Said the Knights: "An evil omen!  
Grief in store!" The door they opened,  
Walked into the room and gasped.  
But the dog like lightning dashed  
For the apple and devoured it.  
Death that instant overpowered it.  
For the apple was, they saw,  
Filled with poison to the core.  
By the dead Princess the brothers  
Bent their heads in tears and uttered  
Holy prayer to save her soul;  
Nothing could their grief console.  
From the bench they raised her, dressed her,  
Wished within a grave to rest her,  
Then had second thoughts. For she  
Was as rosy as if sleep  
Garlands of repose were wreathing  
Round her—though she was not breathing.  
Three whole days they waited, but  
Still her eyes were tightly shut.  
So that night with solemn ritual  
In a coffin made of crystal  
They laid out the body fair  
Of the Princess and from there  
To a hollow mountain bore her,  
Where a tomb they fashioned for her:  
Iron chains they used to fix  
Her glass case to pillars six  
With due caution, and erected  
Iron railings to protect it.







Then the Eldest smote his breast  
And the dead Princess addressed:  
“Ever peaceful be your slumber!  
Though your days were few in number  
On this earth—spite took its toll—  
Yet shall heaven have your soul.  
With pure love did we regard you,  
For your loved one did we guard you,  
But you came not to the groom,  
Only to a chill dark tomb.”

That same day the bad Tsaritsa,  
Waiting for good news to reach her,  
Secretly the mirror took  
And her usual question put:  
“Who is now by far the fairest  
And has beauty of the rarest?”  
And the answer satisfied:  
“You, it cannot be denied.  
You in all the world are fairest  
And your beauty is the rarest!”

In pursuit of his sweet bride  
Through the country far and wide  
Still Prince Yelisei goes riding,  
Weeping bitterly. No tidings!  
For no matter whom he asks  
People either turn their backs  
Or most rudely rock with laughter:  
No one knows what he is after.  
Now to the bright Sun in zeal  
Did the bold young Prince appeal:





“Sun, dear Sun! The whole year coursing  
Through the sky, in springtime thawing  
From the chill earth winter snow!  
You observe us all below.  
Surely you’ll not grudge an answer?  
Tell me, did you ever chance to  
See the Princess I revere?  
I’m her fiancé.” “My dear,”  
Said the Sun with some insistence,  
“I have nowhere seen your Princess,  
So she’s dead, we must presume,  
That is, if my friend, the Moon,  
Has not met her on his travels  
Or seen clues you may unravel.”



Through the dark night Yelisei,  
Feeling anything but gay,  
With a lover’s perseverance  
Waited for the Moon’s appearance.  
“Moon, O Moon, my friend!” he said,  
“Gold of horn and round of head,  
From the darkest shadows rising,  
With your eye the world apprizing,  
You whom stars with love regard  
As you mount your nightly guard!  
Surely you’ll not grudge an answer?  
Tell me, did you ever chance to  
See the Princess I revere?  
I’m her fiancé.” “O dear!”  
Said the Moon in consternation,  
“No, I have not seen the maiden.





On my round I only go  
When it is my turn, you know.  
It would seem that I was resting  
When she passed." "How very vexing!"  
Cried aloud Prince Yelisei.  
But the Moon went on to say:  
"Wait a minute! I suggest you  
Have the Wind come to the rescue.  
Call him now! It's worth a try.  
And cheer up a bit! Goodbye!"

Yelisei, not losing courage,  
To the Wind's abode now hurried.  
"Wind, O Wind! Lord of the sky,  
Herding flocks of clouds on high,  
Stirring up the dark-blue ocean,  
Setting all the air in motion,  
Unafraid of anyone  
Saving God in heaven alone!  
Surely you'll not grudge an answer?  
Tell me, did you ever chance to  
See the Princess I revere?  
I'm her fiancé." "O hear!"  
Said the Wind in turmoil blowing.  
"Where a quiet stream is flowing  
Stands a mountain high and steep  
In it lies a cavern deep;  
In this cave in shadows dismal  
Sways a coffin made of crystal.  
Hung by chains from pillars six.  
Round it barren land in which  
No man ever meets another.  
In that tomb your bride discover!"







With a howl the Wind was gone.  
Yelisei wept loud and long.  
To the barren land he journeyed  
Desperately, sadly yearning  
Once again to see his bride.  
On he rode. A mountain high  
Rose before him, soaring steeply  
From a land laid waste completely.  
At its foot—an entrance dim.  
Yelisei went quickly in.  
There, he saw, in shadows dismal  
Swayed a coffin made of crystal  
Where the Princess lay at rest  
In the deep sleep of the blest.  
And the Prince in tears dissolving  
Threw himself upon the coffin...  
And it broke! The maiden straight  
Came to life, sat up, in great  
Wonder looked about and yawning  
As she set her bed see-sawing  
Said with pretty arms outstretched:  
“Gracious me! How long I’ve slept!”



Down she stepped from out the coffin...  
O the sighing and the sobbing!  
Carrying his bride, he strode  
Back to daylight. Home they rode,





Making pleasant conversation  
Till they reached their destination.  
Swiftly rumour spread around:  
“The Princess is safe and sound!”



It so happened the Tsaritsa  
In her room was idly seated  
By her magic looking-glass  
And to pass the time did ask:  
“Who in all the world is fairest  
And has beauty of the rarest?”  
Said the mirror in reply:  
“You are fair, I can’t deny,  
But the Princess is the fairest  
And her beauty is the rarest!”  
The Tsaritsa leapt and smashed  
On the floor her looking-glass,  
Rushing to the door she saw the  
Fair young Princess walk towards her.







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